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ABSTRACT

Research has shown that although university instructors of English as a Second Language are aware of the benefits that active learning can bring the student, teacher-centered, traditional lecture method classes are still the norm. Resistance to change is due in part to large class sizes, limited instruction hours, and the perception that proactive learning would entail increased preparation time. The purpose of this paper is first to demonstrate the need for active learning in the Business Communication classroom taking into consideration that students today must not only acquire competence in a subject, but they must also be able to apply those competencies as they work in their professions. Secondly, the paper will give practical examples of how role-play, peer correction and case studies are applicable in the university classroom in the study of letter, memo, resume writing as well as in the preparation of meetings and job interviews. (Contains 13 references. Appendixes contain a sample instructional letter-writing format; a class exercise on letter-writing form; an example of a problem-solving situation; a mini-lecture on resume/curriculum vitae writing; a form for taking notes during the mini-lecture; and a list of employment interview questions used during a student simulation.) (Author/RS)

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By Carol Ann Goff-Kfouri

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Abstract
Business Communication Through Active Learning

Research has shown that although university instructors of English as a Second Language are aware of the benefits that active learning can bring the student, teacher-centered, traditional lecture method classes are still the norm. Resistance to change is due in part to large class sizes, limited instruction hours, and the perception that pro-active learning would entail increased preparation time. The purpose of this paper is first to demonstrate the need for active learning in the Business communication classroom taking into consideration that students today must not only acquire competence in a subject, but they must also be able to apply those competencies as they work in their professions. Secondly, the paper will give practical examples of how role-play, peer correction and case studies are applicable in the university classroom in the study of letter, memo, resumé writing as well as in the preparation of meetings and job interviews.

Business Communication Through Active Learning

By
Dr. Carol Ann Goff-Kfouri

Rare are the opportunities for an English language instructor on the university level to hear students comment on the practicality and the usefulness of the material they are taking in the classroom. One of those rare opportunities may occur when teaching a course entitled, Business Communication. One former student recently telephoned from her job as Assistant Manager of a local hotel to report that she was actually using the letter writing techniques she had taken during summer session 1999 and requested the title of a manual of hotel oriented business correspondence. Another student who had learned how to write a complaint letter in the Business Communication class during spring semester tried out his newfound skill by writing to his bank. He reported that the bank had answered him positively; he was convinced that his letter-writing skills were one reason for his success. Students regularly report that the skills taught concerning interview and c.v. writing have helped them to get the job they had applied for. Successful teaching of Business Communication depends on how pro-actively it is taught; students must be invited to put themselves into the shoes of the professional who wants to gain the goodwill of his or clients as well as to make a profit.

This paper will first briefly review the literature concerning the principles and benefits of pro-active learning. Secondly, those principles will be applied to practical strategies designed to make Business Communication a beneficial learning experience for university students.

Rationale for Pro-active Learning

Today's university instructors do not have a choice. They must teach creatively, actively in order to keep up with students living in a world where "the parameters of knowledge are redefining themselves almost daily" (Simplicio, 2002, p. 675). Pre-professionals, as they have been so aptly named by Edens must be taught to think critically, as successful professionals do in the workplace (2000,p.55). In this world where theory evolves so quickly, students must be encouraged to *learn how to learn* so as to carry out problem solving tasks associated with their profession. Instructors can no longer be satisfied that they have passed on the knowledge necessary for a student to succeed; instructors are facilitators in a lifelong learning process, a necessity in most careers today. Even though educators and students are aware of the constant change in their major subjects, it is not easy to compete for and win students' attention. According to Snell (2000, p.472), today's students do not have long attention spans; instructors are encouraged to take this fact into consideration as they plan their class content.

Research has shown that although university instructors of English ESL or ESP are aware of the benefits active learning can bring the student, teacher-centered, traditional lecture or lecture-type methods in which teachers talk and students listen are still the norm in many university classrooms (Bonwell, 1997). It is certain that resistance to change exists due to the following factors: large class sizes, limited instruction hours, and the perception that such classes would require increased preparation time. But it has also shown that active learning leaves a lasting impression on students; students prefer active learning to traditional lectures (Cangelosi, 2000, p.99). Bonwell has also reported that research on students' achievements has shown that many strategies promoting active

learning are comparable to lectures in promoting mastery of content, but they are superior to lectures in promoting thinking and writing skills (1997). Such research results should be the impetus for university professors to innovate in their classrooms.

More literature appears everyday to give evidence in support of the use of experiential learning in courses that are profession-oriented. Although a university education must provide general knowledge or a liberal arts basis, it must also provide a window to the economy for the students being trained. College educators find that experiential learning is a valuable adjunct to traditional instruction in order to do just that (Cantor, 1997). While it is not the role of ESP instructors to place students in an actual bank, or hotel or engineering office, it is possible to bring the office to the student through active learning.

Instructors can incorporate the following into their Business Communication syllabi: case studies suggested by the students using their part-time job experience, inviting bankers and head-hunters as guest speakers, writing feasibility and proposals based on student concerns, including university administration and faculty members in data collection necessary for reports, inviting students to give presentations in university lecture halls with the help of visual aids, carrying out the job search unit with the cooperation of neighboring institutions and university administration, writing and correction of club announcements and memos as a classroom exercise. In this manner, students are being effectively linked to the community; one of the prime goals of experiential learning.

According to proponents of Total Quality Management, students are customers or clients and thus, their needs must be met (Butler, online). It is generally accepted that students, international as well as native speakers of English who wish to pursue graduate

studies must be adept at teamwork and problem solving. Both of those subject areas are closely related to the acquisition of communication and group interaction skills. According to Engelkemeyer (1993, p.28), corporate customers actively search employment candidates with the finely tuned ability to manipulate language that will allow them to apply entrepreneurial skills. Engelkemeyer insists that the skills most actively sought are the following: create and think critically, assess the global environment, design delivery systems, produce and launch new products, compete with global competition, and finally, sustain growth in a corporation. Pro-active learning strategies add to the students' baggage in this domain.

Although there is discussion as to the role of cooperative learning in individual achievement, it is now generally believed that students do learn from each other in an environment supportive of group interaction (Allen & Rooney, 1998, p.48). If the problems discussed in a cooperative learning situation are realistic, ESL students will learn how to develop higher order thinking skills, will feel increased self-esteem and confidence as learners. It naturally follows that the class atmosphere will improve, as there will be improved inter-group relations as well as the natural development of increased social skills.

Practical Application to Classroom Activities

Active learning does not necessarily mean discovery learning; on a university level, instructors of business communication skills must simplify and present the theory to the class, so that the student can apply it very easily. For example, at the beginning of any technical English course, the students must learn that communication on a professional level in English is based on these four criteria: brevity, clarity, politeness and meaningful

content (Wolford & Vanneman,1992,p.35). Students should be reminded that brevity means that unnecessary introductory paragraphs, begging the question statements should be omitted. The general rule becomes, "tell them what you want in the first sentence or paragraph and give the reasons in the second paragraph." Clarity will ensure that students include necessary details. Rather than say, "there are some customers who seem unhappy," the student would learn the habit of writing, "Twenty customers have written in the last month with complaints about our spare parts division." Politeness is extremely simple. Students may be told to begin a request with please; end with thank you, either for your cooperation, or consideration. Students are amazed that these two terms are generally sufficient in English communication. Meaningful content is linked to accuracy in that the information must have a direct relationship to the subject discussed. Once students are aware of these criteria, they find them easy to apply in their correspondence and oral presentations. It is quite simple, as well, to show students the negative effects of excess language and errors on the purpose of the communication. Instructors are encouraged to keep a file of confusing letters or memos on transparencies in order to prove the point that clearly written, accurate correspondence, internal or external, is the image of the company.

Letter Writing Exercises

Appendix I is an elementary, but successful way of teaching letter format. (Bahous). Block format is generally accepted as standard letter writing format in today's business world. The instructor begins the class session by insisting on the necessity of adopting an international letter-writing format and by distributing a copy of Appendix I. Students become familiar with the terminology of letter writing; the instructor may show the class a correctly written letter incorporating the main components of Appendix I. Students are

then given a copy of scrambled components of a letter, and are asked to write them on a blank white paper in the correct order. A corrected form is shown immediately afterwards, or students are given time to correct the placement of each other's work before the correction is shown on a transparency. It has been this author's experience that students "adopt" Appendix I as a guide to letter writing and use it through out the semester during their problem solving sessions. Appendix 2 is an example of a pro-active exercise designed to encourage students to discuss both the content and the form of a letter. Note that the errors are not numerous with regard to format, but the content does not conform to the criteria generally taught. Students are generally taught that a cover-letter has four components: the position being applied for and how the student was informed of the position, one paragraph emphasizing particular educational achievements pertinent to the position, one paragraph emphasizing experience pertinent to the position, and a request for an interview. Appendix 2 is generally completed with a partner or two other classmates who rewrite the letter and present it to the whole class.

Memos, Meetings, and Memo Writing

Problem solving sessions should be preceded by an explanation of the theory involved. Businesses in general apply the following: define the problem; establish criteria the solution must meet, seek information, evaluate the options, propose a solution. Students are often confused when instructors begin the unit on meetings, agendas and minutes. This is understandable since the principles of Robert's Rules of Order are foreign to most of the class, though they are aware that a particular language is applied in most meetings. Appendix 3 is an example of a problem-solving situation designed to teach students the basic principles of memos, meeting and minute writing.

After having studied the basics of Robert's Rules, agendas and minutes in the number of class sessions deemed necessary by the instructor, students are asked to work on the situation described in the worksheet. There are, evidently, many ways to expand this worksheet, depending on the interest and the level of the students. However, one particularly efficient method is to ask the partners who worked together to exchange their work with another set of partners. Peer evaluation is an excellent strategy to encourage students to learn the principles of giving feedback, both positive and negative to others

Resumé Writing and Job Interview.

An integral part of any ESP course, and in particular the Business Communication course, students are most eager to participate in learning methods to facilitate obtaining a career job. In order to present the basics of any resumé, a mini-lecture can be given. A copy of the mini-lecture is given in Appendix 4. As the students listen to the lecture, they are asked to take notes on a worksheet presented in Appendix 5. The particular reason for distributing the worksheet rather than have students take their own notes as is customary in a university classroom is to ensure that the main ideas are in the correct order as presented on the final resumé. Students are then given a sample biography; with a partner they prepare the mock resumé and use it as a guide to write their own. It is interesting to note that many students will comment that the sample resumé presented by the instructor or the textbook being used does not conform to the one they have already prepared for themselves. Instructors are reminded to encourage students to use a classic, clear resumé format.

Many students will have already been interviewed as many have part-time jobs. It is important to emphasize the usefulness of having being interviewed several times before

the "career opportunity" interview. For most students the questions in Appendix 6 are an eye-opener. One creative way of having students get used to answering questions is the following. Divide the class into two teams, four if the class is larger than 20. Designate one student as the interviewer, three others as the search committee. The interviewer asks a student interviewee a question. The student must answer the question intelligently and concisely. The search committee decides if the answer is appropriate. A student who answers inappropriately must sit; those who are sitting become members of the search committee which expands as the game goes on. The game continues until one member of each team is left. Question number 17 is an efficient game-ender. The game must end with a class discussion of the logic of these questions.

Conclusion

It is certain that pro-active teaching does require more preparation, and thus, more creative thinking on the part of the instructor. Students must also be encouraged to see this course as a starting point; a means to ...ure skills on which they can build throughout their careers. But the dividends are many. Students profit from having really practiced what they learn. They are able to compare their answers with other teams if cooperative learning is also incorporated into the learning activities. The lack of practical experience so emphasized by personnel directors and human resource departments as they interview students can be considered as partially erased. However, the real benefit is in knowing that the students are being given the opportunity to learn skills they will carry with them throughout their professional careers and thus are able to confront change without fear.

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Appendix I. Instructors indicate the parts of the letter; those parts enclosed in parenthesis are not obligatory.

Letterhead

Date

(Confidential)

(Referring to Policy #)

Inside Address

Salutation/ Attention

(Re:)

Body

Complementary Closing

Signature

Typed name, degree
Title

Reference Initials

Encls.

cc

Appendix 2. You receive this letter from a job applicant. She is applying for the position of Assistant Hotel Manager. The job description requires that the candidate be able to write meaningful correct letters. Based on this letter, would you recommend her for the job or not? Be ready to explain your reasons.

Re: Job Offer
Lebanon
Achrifieh
3452 Garden Street

11/17/2000

Confidential

Personnel Director,
Smith Hotel
Raouche, Lebanon

Dear Mr. John,

I saw the ad for the job of Assistant Manager in the newspaper the other day. I am sure that this job has been made for me. I am the perfect candidate. I speak very good English; I write and read French and I am fluent in Arabic, my mother tongue. I also take Spanish lessons and so I know that language too.

The ad did not give details concerning the salary you are offering. I am presently working at a hotel and am earning $55,000 annually. Of course, I could not work for any less. I also need to have 3 weeks vacation each summer.

As I have a foreign passport, I am available to travel. I am available for an interview at your convenience.

Truly yours,

Josephine Valentine

JV
Encl: resumé

Appendix 3. Memo Writing / Agenda/ Minutes
Situation

You, Thomas Twinkletoes, are the owner of a small clothing factory. You have some very nice designs. They are original and quite avant-garde. Lately though, some of your designs have leaked out and you actually have seen people wearing copies of your work on the streets of Jbeil.
Write a memo to your employees. Insist that they must keep their work at the factory confidential. Anyone who does not will have his or her contract terminated.

The workers receive the memo. The employee representative, Marielle Smithian feels that the memo is condescending and shows ill will to the employees who work from 7:30-5:30 every day except Sunday for minimum wages. She calls a meeting of the employees. Write the agenda for the meeting. Decide when and where it should take place as well as the items to be placed under new business.

The meeting is taking place. The atmosphere is one of discontent. The chair, Marielle Smithian has to rule several members out of order. Discussion centers on the need to raise salaries, shorten working hours and in general to improve conditions. Several employees made motions in those areas. They were seconded and passed. The final motion called for a meeting with the owner of the factory. With a partner, or in groups of three, imagine what happened and prepare a set of minutes for the meeting. Be sure to include elements of Robert's Rules of Order. Read the various versions of the minutes in class and amend them.

The employee representative, Marielle Smithian writes a memo to the owner, Mr. Thomas Twinkletoes to inform him of the employees discontent and to ask for a meeting so as to discuss solutions.

The owner agrees to the meeting. Marielle and Thomas agree that the situation should not be allowed to get worse as the company is a good one; the employees have always been of good faith and those who had stolen the designs and sold them did so out of financial need. Thomas agrees to a salary increase of 15% and to overtime to those employees who wish to work on Saturdays. Marielle agrees that anyone who, in the future, sells factory designs will have their contract terminated. A joint memo is written.

A variation of this situation could be done by splitting the class into members of the company administration and members of the employee committee. Mock meetings between the two could be held in order to negotiate the terms of the new contract and to solve the various problems the company is experiencing.

Appendix 4. Mini Lecture Resumé/C.V.

Introduction :
A c.v. or a resumé is written as a map of a person's achievements. The purpose is to present oneself in an appealing manner. Employers want perfect resumés. They must be error-free. Students are usually interested in the two basic types of c.v. standard or active. The difference is quite simple. A standard resumé emphasizes the job itself; an active resumé emphasizes the things accomplished on the job such as the amount of profit you helped the company to make.
There are 5 major components to a resumé: Heading, Education, Experience, Activities, and Awards and References.

The heading is made up of the candidate's full name centered and capitalized on one line, with the mailing address on the following lines. In the western system, the date and place of birth, the gender and other personal information are not given. A phone number is included as is an e-mail address.

Education of the candidate is given beginning after high school. If a student has a high G.P.A., it may be added after the degree obtained. Linguistic capacities can also be included under "Education."
Education, that is, degrees and diplomas are listed in order from most recent backwards. Thus, a student would begin with a degree he or she obtained last year. A degree obtained two years ago would figure 2nd on the list. The complete title of the degree must be included as must be the address of the university and the year of the completion of the degree. If the student is to receive his or her degree in the near future he/she may write: Anticipated Graduation, June 2001.

Experience is the third component. The same order, that is from most recent backwards must also be followed in listing jobs previously held. Students who have done small jobs, internships, summer jobs not related to the major may list these jobs under "Non-major related Experience" as they show that the student is an active member of society and is well-rounded. An entry in the experience section begins with the position held, name and address of company, and a very short job description. The entry ends with the year of months of employment.

Activities and Awards is the fourth component. In this section, students should list the scholarships they have obtained and any club activity that sets them apart from other students.

The reference section is the last section. References should not be from the family. They should be distributed among people known from the university, the work place and the professional contacts such as the family doctor, dentist or lawyer.

In conclusion, a resumé should be renewed after receiving a new degree, diploma or a new job. Remember, it must look perfect.

Appendix 5.
Directions: :Listen to the mini-lecture entitled. "Components of a Resumé. Take notes in the space provided. Use your notes to make a resumé for sample biography given by your instructor.

Take notes here.
Introduction:

Five Components of a resumé
A.
B.
C.
D.
E.

I. Important Details
II.
A. Heading
1.
2.
3.

B. Education
1.
2.
3.

C. Experience
1.
2.
3.

D. Activities / Awards
1.
2.

E. References
1.

Conclusion:

Appendix 6.

Directions: With the person sitting closest to you, simulate an interview process. Ask your partner 5 of the questions you find most challenging. Be ready to report your impressions to the group.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What do you know about our company?
3. Why do you want to work here?
4. What do you think determines progress in a good company?
5. What kind of experience do you have for this job?
6. What kind of people do you like to work with?
7. What personal characteristics or qualifications do you have that will make you a Success?
8. How do you interact with people at different levels?
9. How does this job compare with others you have applied for?
10. How do you handle rejection or tension?
11. What have you done that shows initiative and willingness to work?
12. How did you get your last job/summer job?
13. Have you successfully worked with a difficult person?
14. What difficulties do you have tolerating people with different backgrounds and interests than yours?
15. Have you ever resigned or been fired?
16. Explain your role as a group/ team member.
17. Do you think first employers should consider grades?
18. Do you make your opinions known when you disagree with the opinions of your supervisor?
19. What college did you attend, and why did you choose it?
20. I'd be interested to hear about some things you have learned in school that could be used on the job.
21. Which course have you taken that you find least useful?
22. Rate yourself on a scale of one to ten.
23. Tell me three of your strengths and three weaknesses.
24. How would your friends describe you?
25. Do you consider yourself a leader or a follower?
26. What was the last book you read? How did it affect you?
27. See this pen I'm holding. Sell it to me.
28. Define a difficult problem you have had to deal with.
29. Tell me about a time when you put your foot in your mouth.
30. How long would it take you to make a contribution to this company?
31. Where do you see yourself in five years?
32. What interests you most about this job?
33. What interests you least about this job?
34. You have a doctor's appointment those conflicts with an emergency meeting. What would you do?
35. Are you willing to travel?
36. What kind of salary are you worth?